

VZCZCXRO8753
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #0659/01 0721258
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 131258Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2148
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000659

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/08/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SUNNI POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: SECTARIAN VERSUS SECULAR

Classified By: PMIN Robert S. Ford. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Iraq's Sunni Arabs are a composite group of moderate Islamists, secular nationalists, unreconstructed Ba'athists, Former Regime Elements (FRE), and tribal leaders.

While Sunni Arabs share a sense of marginalization in post-Saddam Iraq, they are highly divided and have been unable to develop a common sectarian front. The recent provincial council elections were an important step in remedying Sunni Arabs' boycott of the 2005 provincial elections, and Sunnis will have major governing roles in Anbar, Diyala, Ninewa, and Salah ad-Din. The recent elections also indicate the emergence of a strong secular nationalist (and anti-Kurd) trend among many Sunni Arabs, the latter trend providing common ground with Prime Minister Maliki. However, the foremost Sunni Arab party, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), maintains a national level political alliance with the Kurds and the Shi'a Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), bringing IIP into conflict with (anti-Kurd) Sunni Arab nationalists and PM Maliki (an ISCI rival within Shi'a politics). We see no likelihood that Sunni Arabs will resolve their sectarian/secular identity struggle and squabbles over leadership. Moreover, the Sunni Arab leadership does try to unify ranks when under pressure from Shi'a and Kurds. The efforts to build a Sunni Arab consensus give the hardliners extra influence on high-profile national issues, as we saw during the provincial election law and SoFA deliberations in parliament. END SUMMARY

Who Are the Sunni Arabs?

¶2. (C) Iraq's Arab Sunnis are not monolithic. The largest Arab Sunni political group is a moderate Islamist party, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). The IIP is a sophisticated and organizationally strong party that has strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in countries like Egypt and Syria. It also seeks to develop ties to the Turkish Islamist party, the AKP. The Iraqi Islamic Party currently holds two of the three Arab Sunni senior positions in the GOI: the Vice Presidency (Tariq al-Hashimi) and a Deputy Prime Minister (Rafi al-Eisawi). The third Sunni Arab designated senior government position, the Speakership of Parliament, remains a point of contention between IIP and other Sunni Arab parties following the resignation in December of Mahmoud Mashadani. The IIP's relationship with PM Maliki has been strained, with leaders such as Hashimi routinely complaining that they are marginalized and not consulted on key decisions. Hashimi told us late in February that the IIP's relative moderation including its participation in the national government is hurting its standing with the Sunni Arab electorate since that electorate allegedly perceives it is suffering unfairly in security sweeps and employment discrimination. In national politics, the IIP now has a de facto alliance with the Kurds -- although Hashimi recently told us that this alliance was also costly at the Sunni Arab polling stations in Ninewa. The IIP also cooperates against the Prime Minister with Shi'a Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, the main Shi'a rival of Prime Minister Maliki's Dawa party). For example, the IIP and Vice President Abdel Mehdi from ISCI worked together on the reform program resolution passed

concurrently with parliamentary approval of the SoFA. Ideologically, the IIP's ties with the Kurds and ISCI are an anathema to many Sunni Arabs: the Sunni Arab community still favors a nationalist, centralized political system but the Kurds and ISCI promote a more decentralized system with QKurds and ISCI promote a more decentralized system with multiple regions like Kurdistan.

13. (C) The IIP has two minor partners that comprise the Tawafuq coalition in the Council of Representatives (CoR). The Iraqi People's Conference (IPC) focuses on Arab Sunni issues, but is not particularly Islamist in ideology. The National Dialogue Council (NDC) is a small Sunni group with many former Ba'athist members, some of whom were probably part of the 2005-2007 insurgency. The other major Sunni political coalition is Hewar, composed of the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue (IFND) and some Sunni independents. Hewar and IFND members have connections to former Ba'athists, and like the NDC, some members may have participated in the insurgency.

14. (C) Hadba, another predominantly Sunni Arab party with Ba'athist connections, emerged from the provincial elections with an outright majority of seats on the Ninewa provincial council (the best result that any party in Iraq obtained in a single province). Hadba's core constituency is Sunni Arab, including the thousands of former Iraqi Army officers living in Ninewa and some of the province's dominant tribes. These groups view Kurdish territorial claims with concern and animosity. Indeed, Hadba's ability to tap into the significant anti Kurdish sentiment in Ninewa was an important factor in its strong election showing. While Hadba's success has so far been limited to Ninewa, Hadba leader Osama

BAGHDAD 00000659 002 OF 003

al-Najaifi has told Poloff that the party intends to compete on the national level. It will likely focus on provinces with significant Sunni Arab populations.

15. (C) Another important group is the Sahwa or "Sons of Iraq" (SOI), who generally represent Sunni tribes. The Sahwa ("Awakening") originated among Anbar tribes in 2005 who were paid by MNFI to provide security (a program currently transitioning to GOI financial responsibility). It later expanded to other provinces. Except in Anbar, where it finished only slightly ahead of two other Sunni political groups, SOI political movements did not appear to transition well from a local security organization to a political movement. Many of the SOI-based political movements splintered over political alliances, and post-election activities suggest further splintering, even in Anbar. Their continued viability as a political organization appears uncertain.

Fluid Alliances, Secularism and Opportunism -----

16. (C) The current coalitions are extremely fluid, and provincial elections have led to much political jockeying. In addition to the emergence of the Hadba as a strong provincial player (with national aspirations), Tawafuq and Hewar are re-aligning along sectarian and secular nationalist lines. NDC has all but left Tawafuq to join Hewar under the aegis of a new group, the "National Project," nominally led by former Ba'athist Saleh al-Mutlaq. Both NDC and Hewar echo a secular nationalist sentiment and contain many former Ba'athists, generating an alignment of common political beliefs. Both groups take positions that are anti-Kurd, and favor a strong central government, with an Arab Iraqi, secular identity.

17. (C) Smaller parties such as NDC and IPC are trying to remain relevant by affiliating with larger parties. For these groups, shifting alliances amount to little more than opportunism or survivalism, and several are now shifting to the secular nationalist message that resonated in the recent election. Even some Tawafuq members have moved away from the

Islamist IIP toward the new secular National Project. At least two IPC members formed a new party named al-Mustaqbil (Future) with IIP's Deputy Prime Minister Rafi Essawi, and have now allied with Mutlaq's National Project.

The Issues: Competitive Positions overshadow Common Ground

¶8. (C) One constant within Sunni Arab politics is the constant segmentation driven by diverse ambitions and aspirations. Tribal leaders vie for local control and autonomy from the GOI, while technocrats wrestle with national organization. Sunni Arabs tends to agree on a few issues: detainee releases, (better) implementation of the amnesty law, the passage of laws to remove Ba'athist influence from politics and society, none of these laws have

BAGHDAD 00000659 003 OF 003

been implemented. Hardline nationalists such as Salah al-Mutlaq want the laws withdrawn. Some prominent Sunni Arab leaders such as Rafi Essawi and Mutlaq are former Ba'athists who, despite de-Ba'athification efforts, managed to obtain important positions. Those Sunni Arabs who were not Ba'ath Party members worry that any de-Ba'athification effort might become an anti-Sunni pogrom that could paint all Sunni Arabs with this ideological brush. PM Maliki, who is strongly anti-Ba'athist, has taken an ad hoc approach to rehabilitating certain Ba'athists (including giving some military commands to Shi'a generals who were, as senior officers in Saddam's military, Ba'ath members - a point the PM's confidantes readily admit).

Comment

¶11. (C) The Sunni Arab political landscape defies easy categorization, except that Sunni Arabs consistently complain of marginalization in the post-Saddam Iraq. Sunni Arabs' status as a demographic minority - which used to rule - continues to vex both secular and sectarian Sunni Arab political leaders. Their role in the former regime also has created an abiding mistrust of them among the Shi'a majority and among Kurds, which hampers the full integration of Sunni Arabs into government and societal institutions, and feeds Sunnis' sense of victimization. The Sunni Arab political groups' victories in majority Sunni Arab provincial elections, may ameliorate the worst elements of Sunni Arab political isolation, and demonstrate that mainstream Iraqi Sunnis are - for now - committed to the political process. No Sunni Arab party that runs on a strictly Sunni Arab-based ideological slant will win a national election, however. The leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party in parliament, Ayed Samarra, told us in December that his party has to find a way to break out of its dependence on the Sunni Arab community if it ever hopes to exercise more influence nationally.

¶12. (C) Hardline Sunni Arab secular nationalists (mostly the FRES and former Ba'athists) such as Salah al-Mutlaq want to regain power. Our conversations with many of them suggest that their political perspective is defined by two key elements: their hope to rule again and their frustration at their marginalization. The moderate secularists and Islamists, including IIP, are focusing on building up a viable force (including non-Sunni political parties such as the Kurds and ISCI) to balance the Prime Minister. Divisions among Sunni Arab politicians, however, limit their ability to act as a unified bloc and lead individual factions to seek alliances with (over common interests) with non-Sunnis. This may be necessary for the Sunni Arabs to contribute to the eventual creation of a genuine Iraqi political identity. However, in the short term when we need their votes on a particular issue in parliament, such as the provincial election law or the SoFA ratification, Sunni Arab internal divisions usually give hardliners within their ranks extra influence when the leaders try to unify in the face of the non-Sunni Arabs.

